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Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer (LGBTQ) Youth in Southern Middle Schools

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Abstract: During my experience teaching in a conservative, southern middle school, I have found that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) youth are not afforded the same support systems as other minority groups within the classroom. I have noticed that students who self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ community were less engaged, had lower overall grades, and were frequently victimized by both students and faculty at times. I believed that I could increase the overall mental and physical health in the classroom by instilling supportive means that would translate inside and outside of the classroom. From both personal experiences as a member of the LGBTQ community and students' current challenges, I was able to implement five classroom supports in support of LGBTQ students. The purpose of this article is to advocate for these students and share positive strategies to support them in the classroom.

Keywords: LGBTQ youth, microaggressions, inclusive, preferred pronouns

Introduction

The gay equal rights movement started in the 1920s and lost traction until the late 1960s when activists such as Harvey Milk and Marsha P. Johnson pushed for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered rights. Over the last few decades there has been substantial progress in the search for equality; however, this change has been slow. With more representation of LGBTQ members seen in mainstream media, more youth are self-recognizing their own sexuality and voicing their sexuality at younger ages. It is crucial as these children are recognizing their uniqueness, that all parties involved are able to provide not only understanding but support as well.

This topic relates directly to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s position statement, in which Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe essential attributes of a successful middle school including:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

This past year, the Trevor Project surveyed 35,000 LGBTQ youth across the United States between the ages of 13 and 24 to answer questions regarding their challenges. The survey concluded the following results:

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- 75% of LGBTQ youth reported that had experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once in their lifetime.
- 42% of LGBTQ youth considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgendered and nonbinary youth.
- LGBTQ youth who had access to spaces that affirmed their sexual orientation and gender identity reported lower rates of attempting suicide than those who did not.

These results detail that LGBTQ youth need more support in the classroom not only academically but emotionally as well. The wellbeing of LGBTQ youth not only relies on supportive means inside the classroom but also the climate of their institution and community. LGBTQ youth that live in conservative areas of the United States like the South, face an increase of societal issues. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) reported there was a significant disparity between the national discomfort compared to southern discomfort of citizens in relation to LGBTQ members in their communities (Table 1).

	National Discomfort	Southern Discomfort	Difference of Southern Comfort vs National Discomfort
Seeing a gay co-worker's wedding picture	27%	32%	5%
Electing a gay politician	29%	35%	6%
Attending a same-sex wedding	34%	40%	6%
Bringing a child to a same-sex wedding	43%	50%	7%
Learning my child was dating a transgender person	59%	61%	2%

Table 1 adapted from GLAAD

National and State Contexts

Individuals living in areas that are not supportive of their identities are less likely to flourish due to the unique challenges they face in their schools and communities. For example, LGBTQ people in southern regions of the United States are more likely to be misunderstood due to the influence of conservative beliefs. Generally speaking, Southern Christianity views homosexuality as a sin and as a moral issue. According to the Pew Research Center (PRC), 78% of individuals in South Carolina report as Christians with 69% of those individuals stating that religion is very important to them (Pew Research Center, 2020). Regardless of our personal beliefs or values, however, teachers have an obligation to support, respect, and care for all students.

Application

As with any underrepresented group in the classroom, it is crucial that teachers are equipped with professional development and supportive means to help all students in and out of the classroom. Middle school is a pivotal time where students are not only going through physical changes but social and emotional changes as well. During middle school, students are starting to realize both their sexual and gender identity. It is important that teachers are able to foster a classroom climate that is a safe space for all students. This is especially important in more southern communities where any gender or sexual identity deemed outside the realm of “normalcy” tends to lead to ostracization from their peers.

Over the past two years I have implemented some instructional practices that related to what I wanted as an LGBTQ youth and the future needs of students similar to Student A and Student B. The instructional practices I adapted over the last two years were based on recent testimonials of students at my current school (Table 2).

Student A: “Hi, my name is [redacted] and I identify as transgendered. A lot of kids respect me for who I am, like a lot of my friends for example. But I also face some ‘mean’ people that kept asking my questions that made me feel super uncomfortable. One question that I hate the most is ‘What’s between your legs?!’. A lot of people ask me that over and over again. Only one teacher I feel really respects me and calls me by my preferred pronouns and/or by my preferred name. I have some teachers that refuse to call me by my preferred name. A teacher said, ‘Well I’m going to call you what your parents want me to call you.’ I would really love it if all the teachers would call me by my preferred name and/or my preferred pronouns. I don’t like being called a girl. Please call me a boy because I am one.”

Student A’s name has been redacted for confidentiality. Student A is a current seventh-grade student I have taught for the past two years.

Student B:
 “I don’t feel like part of the school community because I am never accepted because of it, first reason is that my friends dropped me because of it, I even got people that I’m

not even friends with to despise me and people treat me differently. Honestly, I am still friends with my past friends, and they came out to me too, making me feel that I’m not alone. I’ve been let alone because of some students because most of them chose their religion over friends and just left our friendship behind. As a non-binary homosexual, I pretended to be interested in females so that I don’t lose anyone else. People call me by he/him but it’s they/them. I just don’t feel the same as the other kids most of the time, but I’m like my friends and they’re the only people I talk to. The school should just be accepting and supportive of everybody, and that everyone can be equal no matter their preference of gender.”

Student B’s name has been redacted for confidentiality. Student B is a current sixth-grade student.

Table 2: Student Testimonials

With the thoughts and feeling of my students in mind, I have adopted five practices that can be implemented in any class to help foster a welcoming environment for not only LGBTQ students, but all students as well.

Instructional Practices for Supporting LGBTQ Students

Fostering an Inclusive Classroom

In order to make students feel welcomed and safe, it is important to implement a classroom management style that reflects that. In my own practice, I have based my classroom management on building mutually respectful relationships with and among students. Giving students opportunities to work together in diverse groups can help students overcome assumptions they may have about other students based on aspects of their identity and can help all students feel more comfortable in class, especially if they are a member of an underrepresented group (Kennesaw, 2020). By setting a strong foundation in the classroom about acceptance, the students will follow the expectation. A climate of acceptance in the classroom can be implemented in a multitude of ways, i.e., ice breakers, modeling effective ways of communicating, a zero-name-calling policy, etc. An effective ice breaker activity I have implemented in the classroom is *Identify Grouping*. This activity, created by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), is best implemented during the first days of school, when educators are establishing routines and rituals. The activity encourages students to group themselves and then analyze how they chose to group themselves following the activity. This allow students to reflect on how they felt to be grouped with other students and more importantly on how it feels to not be included into a group. *Identifying Grouping* helps build an authentic sense of community in the classroom and supports all students regardless of cultural and personal differences.

I have also found it effective to lead by example by treating all students with kindness and fairness. When adapting and implementing an inclusive classroom, it is important to show

consistency in classroom management consequences for students that are not adhering to the classroom climate. In the event a student is not adhering to the mutual respect and inclusivity in the classroom, correct their behavior immediately. It is important for the students to recognize that broken rules have consequences, but also show that you will be an enforcer of the rules and procedures. For example, in my current classroom, if students resort to name calling, I will conference with the student immediately and ask reflective questions such as “How does it feel when someone is speaking to you in a negative way?” “How do you think the other student may have felt based on your actions?” “Does name-calling make someone feel included?” and “How do you feel when you are excluded by your peers?” Asking these questions allows the student to reflect on their behavior while also encouraging them to change their mindset. By creating a positive classroom climate and environment, all stakeholders can learn in an environment that is conducive for learning.

Acknowledgment of Preferred Names and/or Pronouns

Kids understand themselves better, and at a much younger age, than adults assume. This includes their gender identity. Gender identity refers to one’s inner sense of being male, female, both, or neither (University of Pennsylvania, 2021). From the excerpt from Student A in Table 2, a student in the seventh grade, it is clear that they acknowledge their identity and have preferred pronouns. Yet navigating the legalities and having the courage to call a student their preferred pronouns can raise issues for students, parents and teachers. Under Title IX, students are legally protected to have their preferred name and/or pronouns used in the classroom (NEA, 2016). Parents may push back on calling a student an alternative name due to conflicting ideologies within the family, but students are within their legal right to be addressed by gender confirming names/pronouns. At the beginning of the school year, I recommend that teachers encourage students to fill out a handwritten questionnaire with their preferred name. This provides you with written proof of the students’ request.

As educators, we are advocates for our students and their rights. Even when issues arise with parents or administration (at parent request), we must remain firm in advocating on the behalf of our students. If a student has a preferred name that may challenge the societal feelings of your area and possibly ostracize the student, it is my best practice to call the student by gender-neutral pronouns such as they or them. This makes it clear that you respect their identity and want them to feel comfortable in class.

More Inclusive Sexual Health Classes

The current Science curriculum in South Carolina introduces sexual health classes in the seventh grade. Middle school is a difficult time for students emotionally and socially even without the complexity of gender identity and sexual orientation. In my current school, students can opt out of sexual health classes which can save them from an uncomfortable situation in class, but ultimately can lead to additional ostracization amongst their peers. Opting out of a

sexual health class has additional drawbacks due to the state’s limitations of comprehensive, progressive sexual education. Students who opt out of sex health classes can fail to receive the limited but valuable sexual health education that young teenagers need. Incorporating more inclusive sexual health classes can first start with having a nonbiased teacher implementing the curriculum. This will help implement a positive classroom climate but also stop teachers from subconsciously implementing their own personal beliefs regarding sexuality and sexual health. Sexual health classes can also be more inclusive by choosing non-specific vocabulary when explaining concepts. For example, when talking about the act of sex, instead of saying sex occurs between a woman and a man, the teacher can rephrase the sentence by saying that sex occurs between two consenting adults. This not only reinforces that sex does not only occur between people of the opposite sex, but emphasizes the importance of two consenting adults.

Recognizing Microaggressions

Sexual or gender microaggression is a subtle negative attitude conveying that one’s sexual or gender identity is less valuable than the dominant culture’s defining identities (Foreman, 2019). Students A and B in Table 2 both outlined times when teachers and staff exerted microaggressions that made them feel less than who they are. Student A and B both felt diminished when a teacher refused to call them by their preferred name and/or pronouns.

Teachers refusing to call students by their preferred name is a microaggression. When people do come out as transgendered or gender fluid, using their name assigned at birth is an explicit way to insult them. As a member of a school community, it is important to not stand by and allow others to display these aggressions towards students. According to Foreman (2019), if you ask a person about their pronoun use in a very genuine and kind way, many people may find that validating or welcoming because you are not making assumptions and are giving them the respect to self-identity.

Other examples of microaggressions include allowing students to say statements such as “that’s gay;” assuming students’ identity and/or sexuality based on how they present; and showing unfairness in the classroom. A study conducted by Baricevic and West (2018) interviewed fifteen high school students ranging in grades nine to twelve identified five main microaggressions students commonly shared: 1) expressed denigration; 2) lack of recognition; 3) change in relationships; 4) stereotyping; and 5) mixed messages (see Table 3 for classroom examples). As an educator it is important to both recognize when these microaggressions are happening and to intervene. A positive school community is not effective when faculty and students are not all on the same page.

Have a courageous conversation with colleagues and encourage them to call students by their preferred names and pronouns.

Microaggression	Nonverbal and Verbal Examples
Expressed Denigration	<i>Nonverbal:</i> Rolling of eyes, looks of disgust or disdain, giving the “cold shoulder” when in presence of self-identified LGBTQ student. <i>Verbal:</i> Name calling; making inappropriate jokes about gender and sexual orientation; refusal to be partnered with LGBTQ students; forcing students into boy/girl teams.
Lack of recognition	<i>Nonverbal:</i> Ignoring LGBTQ students; ostracizing students from their peers. <i>Verbal:</i> Refusing to call a student by their pronoun; grouping all LGBTQ individuals as gay
Change in Relationships	<i>Nonverbal:</i> Refusal to speak to a student who has affirmed their gender or sexual preference aloud. <i>Verbal:</i> Targeting a student based on identity; forcing other students to distance themselves from a student.
Stereotyping	<i>Nonverbal:</i> Assigning an LGBTQ student to a pink team, assuming a student’s sexual identity. <i>Verbal:</i> Engaging in speech such as “Of course he likes dolls, he’s gay,” “Sally really good at softball because she’s a lesbian,” “He is clearly going to be a drag queen because he’s gay.”
Mixed Messages	<i>Nonverbal:</i> Praising the student when not exhibiting and/or engaging in stereotypical behaviors but ignoring them when being themselves. <i>Verbal:</i> Speech such as “He’s very smart but too bad he’s gay;” “Sara is really pretty for a lesbian.”

Table 3: Examples of Classroom Microaggressions

Conclusion

As a member of the LGBTQ community who recognized their own sexuality in middle school, I have experienced individuals along the way that made school unbearable. LGBTQ students are no different than any other student in the classroom and should be treated with equal respect. This is by no means a comprehensive list on how to support LGBTQ students. Teachers should actively educate themselves and seek out professional development to aid and assist supporting underrepresented students in the classroom. The mentioned instructional strategies can only be applied with high fidelity through teacher education and understanding of this group of students. An educator should be a blank slate in the classroom not showing religious, political or sexual identity and orientation biases in the classroom. It is crucial for teachers and educators alike to remember that all students want to be accepted, treated kindly, and made to feel safe in the betterment of their education.

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